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RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO 4093
RUEHCG/AMCONSUL CHENNAI 9358
RUEHBI/AMCONSUL MUMBAI 6663
RUEHON/AMCONSUL TORONTO 1192
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 COLOMBO 000596

SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR SCA/INSB

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TAGS: PGOV PHUM PREL KPAO CE

SUBJECT: SRI LANKA: MORE THREATS TO AND ATTACKS ON
JOURNALISTS

Classified By: CHARGE D'AFFAIRES JAMES R. MOORE, FOR REASONS 1.4 (B) AND (D)

¶11. (C) SUMMARY: Since the Government's victory against the LTTE, GSL officials have begun openly criticizing journalists that it claims were on the LTTE payroll. Public comments by the Army Commander and Inspector General of Police have heightened concerns among journalists for their safety. Since May 26, four journalists have come to the Embassy to relay their concerns for their safety and to request Embassy assistance. One of those journalists, Poddala Jayantha, was later attacked on June 1 by unknown assailants. The Embassy continues to explore mechanisms to support journalists who are under threat, and is pushing the Government of Sri Lanka to ensure their safety and desist from making comments that could incite continued violence. End summary.

OFFICIALS' COMMENTS CREATE OVERHEATED ATMOSPHERE

¶12. (C) Beginning on May 27, the Sri Lankan press reported widely comments made by Army Commander Fonseka and the Inspector General of Police (IGP) Jayantha Wickramaratne. Both stated that LTTE cadres now in custody had disclosed the names of journalists who were funded by the LTTE. General Fonseka claimed that most were Sinhalese, some were members of organizations advocating greater media freedom, and some had secret meetings with the LTTE. Both Fonseka and Wickramaratne labeled the journalists as traitors and said that action would be taken against them.

¶13. (C) Among the reports, the state-owned television station ITN carried a report on the Inspector General's comments on its May 28th broadcast. While ITN reported the Inspector General's remarks, it broadcast images of protests, meetings, and gatherings of media trade unions and advocacy organizations. The camera zoomed in on the faces of individual members and leaders of those groups.

YOUNG JOURNALIST REPORTS SURVEILLANCE; FLEES

¶14. (C) In the overheated climate engendered by the officials' comments, several journalists and members of media

organizations expressed to Embassy officers heightened concerns for their personal safety. On May 26, Ruan Pethiyagoda of the Sunday Leader communicated to Emboffs that he was being followed and had gone into hiding. Pethiyagoda had received threats recently after Sri Lankan Government officials learned he was researching a story that involved allegations of corruption on the part of Defense Secretary Gothabaya Rajapaksa in large armed forces procurement transactions. Pethiyagoda worked closely with Lasantha Wickramatunga, editor of the Sunday Leader, who was slain in January 2009. As Pethiyagoda is an Australian dual national, Emboffs contacted an Australian High Commission officer about the case, who accompanied Pethiyagoda to the airport on May 127. He is now safely outside of Sri Lanka.

¶15. (C) On May 29, Rosanne Anderson of the Federation of Media Employees Trade Union (FMETU), Lankapeli Dharmasiri of FMETU, and Poddala Jayantha of the Sri Lankan Working Journalists Association met with PAO to discuss their concerns about the statements made by the Army Commander and the IGP. The three journalists expressed fears for their own safety. In particular, they were worried that statements by the Army Commander and the IGP would engender a new wave of violence against journalists by ultranationalist gangs and thugs. The journalists specifically requested assistance in getting Jayantha and his family out of the country. Jayantha had left the country several months ago with support from an EU "Safety Fund" for journalists and human rights defenders, but returned recently because of concerns about his family's security. Dharmasiri told PAO that he did not want to leave,

COLOMBO 00000596 002 OF 003

explaining that he was one of the lone media advocates remaining in Sri Lanka and wanted to continue his efforts in the country. He requested Embassy assistance to increase security. Finally, following the meeting, Anderson shared with PAO that she had applied for asylum in Australia. Later, she sent PAO an e-mail requesting asylum in the United States.

ABDUCTION AND BEATING OF MEDIA ACTIVIST

¶16. (C) On the evening of June 1, Jayantha was abducted and beaten by unknown assailants after getting off a bus, on his way home from work. Jayantha suffered two fractures to his left leg. Jayantha told PAO that the assailants shaved his hair and stuffed it in his mouth to muffle his screams. They shoved the hair so deeply that it protruded from his nose. Jayantha underwent surgery on June 3rd. According to Jayantha, doctors told him he would be hospitalized for two weeks and that recovery would take three months.

¶17. (C) On June 2 Police arrested Lanka E-News editor Benette Rupasinghe and publisher Sandaruwan Senadeera for possible involvement in the attack. According to media contacts, Lanka E-News, an online Sri Lankan news site, was the first to report on the attack. Because the report was so soon after the attack, police claimed they had suspicions the two journalists might be involved, according to the media contacts. Rupasinghe and Senadeera were released after posting bail.

DEFENSE JOURNALIST AGAIN FLEES COUNTRY

¶18. (C) Military affairs analyst Iqbal Athas ceased writing his regular column for the Sunday Times (Colombo) several months ago because of fears of reprisals. He had sought safe haven abroad on several previous occasions, but returned to Sri Lanka and lived in hiding. Athas became fearful after the attack on Poddala Jayantha, telling told Pol Chief that he was being followed by men on motorcycles. On June 2, Athas again fled abroad.

EMBASSY RESPONSE

¶ 9. (C) Since the May 29th meeting, Post is working to assist the three threatened journalists. Embassy continues to press senior Government of Sri Lanka officials to promote and protect media freedom. On June 2, following the attack on Jayantha, CDA Moore spoke with Presidential Advisor Basil Rajapaksa. Charge expressed his concern at the most recent assault on a journalist. He reminded Basil that Ambassador Blake, in his farewell call, encouraged the Government to focus on reconciliation and human rights following its military victory against the Tamil Tigers. Charge stressed that the attack on Jayantha was possibly a result of the IGP's May 29 public announcement that journalists accused of taking payments from the LTTE would be punished. Basil responded that "the public" is angry that journalists may have been on the LTTE's payroll, saying the government could not control these passions. Charge countered that if that is the case, it is a result of the IGP's announcement and the images that were aired at the time. Basil expressed some sympathy for Podalla, noting that he previously worked in the media unit of the Sri Lankan Freedom Party. Basil said members of the President's staff visited Jayantha in the hospital. However, Basil stopped short of making a firm commitment to provide security for Jayantha and his family, but did say "we are trying to see if he can be moved and provided security."

¶ 10. (C) On June 3, PAO met with Sam de Silva of Internews (protect). Internews, an NGO tasked with developing

COLOMBO 00000596 003.2 OF 003

independent media in Sri Lanka, has now taken over managing the "Safety Fund" for journalists with support from EU member states. De Silva said that Internews planned to resume biweekly meetings of members of the diplomatic missions that have provided support to journalists under threat with the goal of better coordinating responses. De Silva was aware of Jayantha's case and had been in contact with him indirectly since the attack through another interlocutor. (Note: Internews provided funding to Jayantha through the safety fund that enabled Jayantha to leave the country in January.) De Silva reported that Jayantha expressed desire to leave the country with his family as soon as he is able to travel, and asked Embassy to assist with the funding to enable his wife and daughter to travel with him, since the "Safety Fund" does not cover dependents. Internews will also work on finding a European country to host them. Regarding the other two journalists, Dharmasiri told us he desired to stay in Sri Lanka, but would like assistance in paying for a safe house. Post will connect Dharmasiri with Internews concerning a safety fund grant to pay for lodging. Post assesses that the threat against Ms. Anderson is less severe, and will await the outcome of her pending application for asylum in Australia before seeking travel funds for her.

¶ 11. (C) COMMENT: The GSL's victory has emboldened Sinhalese nationalists. As the most recent intemperate statements against journalists indicate, it appears that the Government intends to continue chauvinistic rhetoric it believes will maintain its support among this key constituency. Post expects the media will continue to feel threatened and inclined toward self-censorship. Newspapers such as the Daily Mirror that previously supported the political opposition in their editorial stance, have increasingly become echoes of the government-owned press. Even the outspoken Sunday Leader has muted its anti-government stance and has muted its crusading tone, shying away from the aggressive investigative journalism that was its hallmark. We expect that an increasing number of journalists will come to the Embassy and other foreign missions for support and protection. For many of them, there appear to be few viable alternatives to fleeing the country, at least temporarily. Those who return may find that the threat against them has not diminished, as Jayantha's case shows.

MOORE